

Germany's Invasion of Norway and Denmark

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Great Britain Forced Invasion

Germany had no plans to invade Norway or Denmark when hostilities began that later became known as World War II. Hitler considered it advantageous to have a neutral Scandinavia. On August 12, 1939, in a conversation with Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano, Hitler stated that he was convinced none of the belligerents would attack the Scandinavian countries, and that these countries would not join in an attack on Germany. Hitler's statement was apparently sincere, and it is confirmed in a directive of October 9, 1939. [\[1\]](#)

Hitler eventually became convinced of the need for a preemptive strike to forestall a British move against Norway. Adm. Erich Raeder in a routine meeting with Hitler on October 10, 1939 pointed out that the establishment of British naval and air bases in Norway would be a very dangerous development for Germany. Raeder said that Britain would be able to control access to the Baltic, and would thus be in a position to hinder German naval operations in the Atlantic and the North Sea. The flow of iron ore from Sweden, which passed via Narvik, Norway through the North Sea, would end, and the Allies would be able to use Norway as a base for aerial warfare against Germany. [\[2\]](#)

In a meeting on December 18, 1939, Hitler let it be known that his preference was for a neutral Norway, but if the enemy tried to extend the war into this area, he would be forced to stop them. Hitler soon had convincing evidence that Britain would not respect Norwegian neutrality. German naval intelligence in February 1940 broke the British naval codes and obtained important and accurate information about Allied activities and plans. The intercepts indicated the Allies were preparing for operations against Norway using the pretext of helping Finland in its defense against the invasion by the Soviet Union underway at the time. The intercepts confirmed Adm. Raeder's fears about British intentions. [\[3\]](#)

Both Britain and France believed the threat of Germany losing badly needed iron ore would provoke Germany into opening up military operations in Scandinavia. However, Britain and France had somewhat different objectives. Britain believed German operations could be challenged effectively and successfully by the Allies, resulting in quick military victories for the Allies in a war that had stagnated further south on the European Continent. France wanted to open a new front in order to divert German attention and resources from her border. Both Britain and France felt the maritime blockade of Germany would become more effective once Norway was conquered, especially if they succeeded in severing the flow of iron ore to Germany from Sweden. They were willing to accept great military and political risks to this end. [\[4\]](#)

German intelligence reports continued to indicate that the Allies would invade Norway even after peace was concluded between Finland and the Soviet Union. On March 28, 1940, the Germans learned of the decision taken by the Allied Supreme War Council to mine Norwegian waters. A diplomat's report on March 30, 1940, indicated that the Allies would launch operations in northern Europe within a few days. British mining operations in Norwegian territorial waters began on April 8, 1940. Although no armed clashes with Norwegian forces took place, the British mining operations were a clear violation of Norway's neutrality and constituted an act of war. [\[5\]](#) The Norwegian government protested against the mine-laying to the British, giving them 48 hours in which to sweep up the mines. [\[6\]](#)

Germany's decision to invade Denmark was based on the strategy of Gen. Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, who concluded that it would be desirable to occupy Denmark as a "land bridge" to Norway. Denmark quickly surrendered to German forces on April 9, 1940. [7]

The German invasion of Norway on April 9, 1940 was made to block Britain's invasion of Norway, not unlike the Allies' subsequent invasion of Iceland to block such a move by the Germans. The Germans achieved most of their objectives in what must be viewed as a stunning military success. The occupation of Norway complicated British blockade measures and kept open the door to the Atlantic for possible interference with British supplies coming from overseas. The air threat to Germany by a British presence in Norway was also avoided, as was the possibility of Sweden falling under the control of the Allies. Most importantly, Germany's source of iron ore was secure, and the German navy was able to skirt some of the limitations that otherwise might have been imposed on it by geography. [8]

British hopes that quick victories could be achieved by enticing the Germans into an area where they would confront enormous British naval superiority were not realized. The hoped-for British victory in Norway turned into a humiliating defeat. The French objective of reducing the threat to her homeland by opening a new theater of war was also not achieved. A protracted war in Norway and the consequent drain on German resources did not materialize. [9]

U.S. military historian Earl F. Ziemke wrote: "As an isolated military operation the German occupation of Norway was an outstanding success. Carried out in the teeth of vastly superior British sea power, it was, as Hitler said, 'not only bold, but one of the sauciest undertakings in the history of modern warfare.' Well planned and skillfully executed, it showed the Wehrmacht at its best..." [10]

The only major advantage to the Allies was a hardening of public opinion against Germany in neutral countries, especially in the United States. [11] American physicist Robert Oppenheimer spoke for many Americans when he said, "We have to defend Western values against the Nazis." [12] Most people did not know that Germany's invasion of Norway and Denmark had been made to preempt Allied military initiatives of quite the same nature in Norway.

Confirmation by Establishment Historians

The preemptive nature of Germany's invasion of Denmark and Norway has been acknowledged by some establishment historians. For example, historian David Cesarani, who said he did not believe in freedom of speech regarding the so-called Holocaust, [13] wrote:

The campaign in the west was triggered by a British naval incursion into Norwegian waters in February 1940. In an attempt to limit iron ore imports to Germany, the British next mined Norwegian sea lanes and landed troops at Trondheim. On 9 April [1940], Hitler responded by launching an invasion of Norway and ordered the occupation of Denmark. The Danes capitulated within a day, but land battles in Norway and naval engagements continued for eight weeks until Allied troops were evacuated. [14]

History is written by the (ultimate) victors, and the (ultimate) victors, like all victors, did everything possible to make their actions in World War II look good. As Winston Churchill famously stated in the late 1940s, "History will be kind to me because I intend to write it." [15]

However, even Winston Churchill acknowledged British complicity in Germany's invasion of Norway. Churchill wrote:

On April 3, the British Cabinet implemented the resolve of the Supreme War Council, and the Admiralty was authorized to mine the Norwegian Leads on April 8. I called the actual mining operation "Wilfred," because by itself it was so small and innocent. As our mining of Norwegian waters might provoke a German retort, it was also agreed that a British brigade and a French contingent should be sent to Narvik to clear the port and advance to the Swedish frontier. Other forces should be dispatched to Stavanger, Bergen, and Trondheim, in order to deny these bases to the enemy. [\[16\]](#)

Churchill wrote that Britain implemented these military activities:

The Norwegian Government was...chiefly concerned with the activities of the British. Between 4:30 and 5 A.M. on April 8, four British destroyers laid our minefield off the entrance to West Fiord, the channel to the port of Narvik. At 5 A.M. the news was broadcast from London, and at 5:30 a note from His Majesty's Government was handed to the Norwegian Foreign Minister. The morning in Oslo was spent in drafting protests to London. [\[17\]](#)

Churchill thus acknowledged that Britain was illegally mining Norwegian waters. Germany's invasion of Norway was designed to preempt Britain's military activities in Norway.

Norwegians Suffer from Invasion

The campaign in Norway lasted 62 days and unfortunately resulted in a substantial number of casualties. Most sources list about 860 Norwegians killed. Another source estimates the number of Norwegians killed or wounded at about 1,700, with another 400 civilians estimated to have died during the campaign. Norway also effectively lost her entire navy, and her people experienced increased hardships during Germany's five-year occupation. [\[18\]](#)

Germany during its occupation of Norway sometimes required Norwegians to make sacrifices to help the German war effort. For example, in October 1941 Germany demanded that Norwegians surrender their woolen blankets, jackets, knapsacks, tent outfits, and that all business concerns hand over heavy trousers and other warm clothing. This merchandise was needed by the German troops who were freezing to death in the Soviet Union. Failure to comply could be punished by up to three years' imprisonment. [\[19\]](#)

Living conditions in Norway became worse as the war progressed. Undernourishment was common because of insufficient and inferior food, which in turn led to an increase in diseases such as pneumonia, diphtheria and tuberculosis. The lack of clothing and shoes was also felt more and more as the war progressed. [\[20\]](#)

The winter of 1944 was particularly harsh in Europe, including Norway, affecting both living conditions and social life. The desperate food shortages and the daily hunt for fuel were the dominant concerns of the Norwegian civilian population. Oslo suffered its harshest winter in generations. [\[21\]](#)

The German invasion had a profound effect on Norwegian foreign policies after the war. Instead of returning to a policy of neutrality, Norway embraced collective security and became a charter member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While Norway never elected to become a member of the European Union, Norwegians still strongly support the traditional security system that came into being after the war. [\[22\]](#)

Quisling Executed

Leader of Norway's fascist party Vidkun Quisling, backed by the German occupation authorities, seized control of the Norwegian government shortly after Germany's invasion of Norway. The news of Quisling's coup in Norway was welcomed in Berlin, with Hitler recognizing Quisling's new government immediately. Hitler said to Alfred Rosenberg on the night of April 10, 1940, "Quisling can form his government."[\[23\]](#)

Quisling soon became very unpopular in Norway. He had been making anti-Jewish statements since the 1930s when he condemned both liberalism and Marxism as Jewish creations. In Frankfurt on March 26, 1941, Quisling said in a lecture that Norway had for centuries been increasingly undermined by Jewish influence and subversion. Quisling said that a total of 10,000 Jews and half-Jews were corrupting Norwegian blood like "destructive bacilli", and he advocated common European legislation against the Jews.[\[24\]](#)

Quisling was unpopular among Norwegians for more than his anti-Jewish statements. The press and public opinion in Norway ruthlessly denounced Quisling and his movement as treacherous, and kept attacking him for unwarranted collaboration with the enemy. Before long Quisling's name replaced the name of Kuusinen as the synonym for a traitor. His name became a byword for traitor in nearly all languages. At the end of the war Quisling was reading reports from the international press about "Japan's Quisling" and "Russia's Quisling".[\[25\]](#)

Quisling was tried in Norway after the war before a judicial tribunal of nine members, which included four professional judges and five civilians. Erik Solem, a highly respected judge, served as president of the court responsible for conducting the proceedings. Quisling's defense attorney raised an objection to Solem's presiding as judge since Solem had expressed strong opposition to Quisling's policies during the war. The appellate panel of Norway's Supreme Court refused to sustain the defense's challenge, stating that if this objection was applied broadly, there would hardly be anyone in Norway qualified to sit in judgement at the trial.[\[26\]](#)

No one had been executed in Norway since 1876, 11 years prior to Quisling's birth. The death penalty had been removed from the civilian criminal code in 1902 because of the public's opposition to it. However, the death penalty still remained on the books as part of the military penal code.[\[27\]](#)

Quisling was found guilty by the Norwegian court. To justify the death penalty, the judgement bluntly stated that all of Quisling's actions from the summer of 1939 onwards were guided by a plan to cooperate with Nazi Germany—a plan consisting of occupation, coup and collaboration. Quisling was executed by a firing squad early in the morning on October 24, 1945.[\[28\]](#)

Ten years after Quisling's trial it was established beyond doubt that Quisling had never played an active role in Hitler's attack on Norway, as the court had stated in 1945. Quisling's image as a monster, as maintained by the prosecution, soon gave way to more-human images.[\[29\]](#)

Conclusion

Other members of Quisling's *Nasjonal Samling* Party were arrested after the war. Richard Petrow wrote:

The German capitulation brought mass arrests. Thousands of members of the Nasjonal Samling Party were seized, some whose only "crime" had been party membership. By July 1 [1945] Norwegian prisons and concentration camps were filled to overflowing with 14,000 new inmates. By the end of the year

more than 90,000 persons were arrested, investigated, or interrogated for wartime activities. More than half this number—46,000—eventually were convicted of wartime offenses...Thirty Norwegian collaborators and 15 Germans were sentenced to death for wartime treason or atrocities. [\[30\]](#)

Fortunately, after a few years, Norway was ready to forgive the bulk of its war criminals. By the summer of 1948, parole was granted to all war criminals who had served at least half of their sentences. Norwegians sentenced to life imprisonment were released after serving an average term of eight years and three months. Among those sentenced to death, however, 12 Germans and 25 Norwegians were executed. [\[31\]](#)

For many in Norway, the word Quisling is still infamous and synonymous with the word traitor. [\[32\]](#) Most of these Norwegians do not realize that Germany's invasion of Norway was made to preempt Britain's invasion of their country.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Lunde, Henrik O., *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War: The Battle for Norway, 1940*, Philadelphia and Newbury: Casemate, 2010, p. 44.

[\[2\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 57.

[\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 63.

[\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[\[5\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 85-86, 95-96.

[\[6\]](#) Hoidal, Oddvar K., *Quisling: A Study in Treason*, Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1989, p. 369.

[\[7\]](#) Keegan, John, *The Second World War*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1990, p. 50.

[\[8\]](#) Lunde, Henrik O., *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War: The Battle for Norway, 1940*, Philadelphia and Newbury: Casemate, 2010, p. 544.

[\[9\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 545.

[\[10\]](#) Ziemke, Earl F., *The German Decision to Invade Norway and Denmark*, CMH Pub. 70-7-02, p. 71.

[\[11\]](#) Lunde, Henrik O., *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War: The Battle for Norway, 1940*, Philadelphia and Newbury: Casemate, 2010, p. 551.

[\[12\]](#) Bird, Kai and Sherwin, Martin J., *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 2006, p. 149.

[\[13\]](#) Guttenplan, D. D., *The Holocaust on Trial*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 298.

[\[14\]](#) Cesarani, David, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016, p. 294.

[15] Davies, Norman, *No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2007, p. 487.

[16] Churchill, Winston S., *The Second World War: The Gathering Storm*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948, p. 579.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 589.

[18] Lunde, Henrik O., *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War: The Battle for Norway, 1940*, Philadelphia and Newbury: Casemate, 2010, pp. 542-543, 545.

[19] Rygg, A. N., *American Relief for Norway*, New York: Arnesen Press, Inc., 1947, p. 26.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[21] Dahl, Hans Frederick, *Quisling: A Study in Treachery*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 319-320.

[22] Lunde, Henrik O., *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War: The Battle for Norway, 1940*, Philadelphia and Newbury: Casemate, 2010, p. 553.

[23] Dahl, Hans Frederick, *Quisling: A Study in Treachery*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 174-175.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 222.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

[26] Hoidal, Oddvar K., *Quisling: A Study in Treason*, Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1989, pp. 725-726.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 747.

[28] Dahl, Hans Frederick, *Quisling: A Study in Treachery*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 405, 415.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 417.

[30] Petrow, Richard, *The Bitter Years: The Invasion and Occupation of Denmark and Norway April 1940-May 1945*, New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1974, pp. 348-349.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

[32] Cohen, Maynard M., *A Stand against Tyranny: Norway's Physicians and the Nazis*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997, p. 279.

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